

# **Flexible job search behavior among unemployed jobseekers: antecedents and outcomes**

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Een onderzoek in opdracht van de Vlaamse minister van Financiën, Begroting, Werk, Ruimtelijke Ordening en Sport en de Vlaamse minister van Energie, Wonen, Steden en Sociale Economie, in het kader van het Vlaams Programma Strategisch Arbeidsmarktonderzoek.

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## 1. Abstract

The interest in flexible job search behavior among unemployed jobseekers, i.e., the extent to which jobseekers also look for jobs that deviate from their studies and earlier work experience, has grown considerably in recent years. Both scholars and policymakers believe that this type of job search behavior is important for the unemployed and can improve their employment prospects. Up to now however, few empirical studies have focused on this topic. Consequently, little is known about who actually searches in a flexible way and whether a flexible search actually affects one's reemployment chances. With this study, we aim to address this gap. We distinguish three types of flexible job search behavior: flexibility with respect to pay and hierarchical level, flexibility with respect to skill use and flexibility with respect to commuting time. We examine how these types are related with situational and individual antecedents of job search behavior and with job search success. Results indicate that especially those without a clear career plan in mind and who are less optimistic about their labor market prospects search for less paying/lower level jobs and for jobs that demand different skills. Also those who are more adaptable in the career search more often for jobs in different professions. On the other hand, individuals feeling less financially or more socially pressurized, or who are more committed to work or adaptable in the career search more for jobs that demand more extensive commuting time. Results also show that none of the three types of flexible job search behavior improves one's reemployment success. Implications of these results are discussed.

*Keywords:* flexible job search behavior, unemployment, situational variables, individual difference variables, job search success

## 2. Introduction

In this study, we examine antecedents and outcomes of flexible job search behavior among unemployed jobseekers. Flexible job search behavior refers to the extent to which jobseekers look for jobs that deviate from their studies and earlier work experience (Van den Broeck, 2010; Venn, 2012). In recent years, flexible job search behavior has received increasing attention of both policymakers and scholars. Policymakers of many countries are confronted with an increased difficulty to match supply and demand on the labor market (European Commission, 2012). This is due to a rising mismatch between the characteristics and requirements of available jobs on the one hand and jobseekers' preferences and skills on the other (Barlevy, 2011; Kosfeld, Dreger & Eckey, 2008; Herremans, Braes, Sels & Vanderbiesen, 2011). Many policymakers believe that this issue can (partly) be resolved by (more) flexibility on behalf of

the unemployed and therefore stimulate unemployed individuals to broaden their job search and take into account job opportunities that deviate from their initial preferences. In addition, they expect positive effects of flexible job search behavior on the reemployment of unemployed jobseekers (e.g., Grubb, 2001; Venn, 2012), as this type of job search behavior may positively influence people's search effort and as such their chances of being hired. Moreover, as flexible jobseekers are less picky, they may accept a job offer faster which also may increase their reemployment likelihood. Because of these positive connotations on flexibility, almost all OECD countries have legislation in which they demand unemployed individuals to search in a flexible way for a new job on a number of aspects, like *pay level* (i.e., an unemployed individual must also search for and accept jobs which offer a lower wage than the previous job or than the usual wage for that occupation), *job content* (i.e., an unemployed individual must also search for and accept jobs in other occupational areas than his/her previous job or studies), and *commuting time* (i.e., an unemployed individual must also search for and accept jobs which demand a certain predetermined transportation time) (Ministry of Finance, 1998; Hasselplüg, 2005; Venn, 2012).

In addition to policymakers, career scholars also find flexible job search behavior in unemployed jobseekers important. Career scholars attach a general importance to flexibility—or what is often referred to as *adaptability*—as a competence in today's career landscape. The prevailing notion in career research suggests that in the last decades, traditional, steady career paths guided by employers have increasingly been replaced by so-called “protean” and “boundaryless” careers, i.e., careers in which the onus rests on individuals themselves and where physical boundaries are blurred and can easily be crossed (Arthur, 1994; Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Hall, 2004). In this career vision, being able to adjust swiftly to different work and career circumstances—i.e., being adaptable—is deemed indispensable when one makes a transition (e.g., Hall, 2004; Koen, Klehe, Van Vianen, Zikic & Nauta, 2010; Mervish & Hall, 1994). Since unemployed jobseekers are on the eve of a transition, being adaptable is considered a necessary career skill for them (e.g., Koen et al., 2010). Moreover, it is believed that flexibility will help unemployed individuals regain a job (e.g., Van den Broeck et al., 2010). It is anticipated that employers will try to attract flexible individuals, since companies are increasingly working in a turbulent environment and are in need of human flexibility to address this context (e.g. Lawler, 1994; Peiró, García-Montalvo & Gracia, 2002). Employers are therefore believed to increasingly hire individuals who demonstrate flexibility (Van den Broeck et al., 2010).

Despite the importance attached to flexibility by both policymakers and career scholars, few empirical research has been done on this matter. As such, at present, it is not known which jobseekers search in a flexible way. Yet, more insight of the profile of flexible jobseekers is relevant in order to understand the effects of this type of behavior. In addition, research has not yet investigated whether flexible job search behavior actually leads to more reemployment success, as is expected from policymakers and career scholars. It is for instance also possible that individuals who search flexibly may be perceived as fitting less well with the organization and the vacant job as they have to make more sacrifices or have less relevant working experience (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman & Johnson, 2005; Kulik, Roberson & Perry, 2007). As such flexible unemployed jobseekers may receive less job offers. Recent empirical research indeed sheds doubt on policymakers' and career scholars' believe that flexibility enhances people's chances of finding a new job. Vansteenkiste, Verbruggen and Sels (2013) investigated whether a flexible *attitude* during unemployment constrains or stimulates one's job search success and found that unemployed jobseekers who adopt a flexible attitude receive less job offers. However, one of the downsides of their study is that it is cross-sectional and, consequently, does not look at the actual reemployment likelihood of unemployed jobseekers, nor at actual job search behavior.

To the best of our knowledge, no empirical study has yet investigated who searches flexibly and whether this behavior leads to reemployment success (Van den Broeck, 2010; Venn, 2012). With this study, we try to expand the current understanding of flexible job search behavior by examining its antecedents and outcomes. To better understand who searches in a flexible way, we examine whether situational (financial hardship, subjective norms) and individual difference variables (employment commitment, reemployment efficacy, career adaptability and career planning) affect to which extent job seekers search in a flexible way (cf., Wanberg, Watt & Rumsey, 1996; Koen et al., 2010). In addition, we investigate whether flexible job search behavior leads to reemployment success. Hereto, we re-examine the model of Vansteenkiste et al. (2013) for flexible job search behavior and extend and adapt it by examining the model in a longitudinal context and by looking at the reemployment likelihood in addition to the number of job offers and studying one's flexible job search behavior rather than flexible job search attitude.

This study makes several contributions. First, by focussing on flexible job search behavior, we address the demand for a broader approach towards job search behavior (e.g., Koen et al., 2010; Saks & Ashforth, 2002). Indeed, up to now, most studies have concentrated on



unemployed individuals' job search intensity (Kanfer, Wanberg & Kantrowitz, 2001; Saks, 2005) or job search strategy (Crossly & Highhouse, 2005; Koen et al., 2010), whereas much more insight into the unemployment process can be gained from introducing and studying new types of measures of job search behavior (cf. Koen et al., 2010; Saks & Ashforth, 2002). Second, by examining the impact of flexible job search behavior on reemployment success, we address the calls for more studies on the outcomes of this job search behavior (Van den Broeck et al., 2010) and try to provide more insight into whether flexibility indeed helps to find reemployment or not. More accurate information on this topic could help to assess the impact and prerequisites of a re-orientation policy more accurately, and to formulate recommendations on measures that could support such a policy. Third, by investigating the antecedents of flexible job search behavior, we can know better which jobseekers search in a flexible way, which could help understanding if they have special counseling needs and helps interpreting the outcomes of flexible job search behavior on job search success.

### **3. Flexible job search behavior (FJSB)**

#### **3.1 Behavior versus attitude**

In this study, we focus on Flexible Job Search Behavior (FJSB). Hence, we choose to study flexibility as a job search *behavior* and not *attitude*. The limited research on flexibility among unemployed job seekers has mainly focused on flexibility as an attitude (Van den Broeck et al., 2010; Vansteenkiste et al., 2013). Attitudes and behavior are however not always closely interrelated. In this respect, scholars coin the term 'evaluative inconsistency' to refer to "failures of general attitudes to predict a given behavior with respect to the object of the attitude" (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005, p. 185). One of the explanations for these inconsistencies is that people who have a certain attitude may behave in different ways (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005; Thurstone, 1931), and as such, attitudes can be harder to link to outcomes than behaviors. In addition, a focus on behavior rather than attitudes is also in line with what OECD policymakers expect from unemployed jobseekers. Unemployed jobseekers are for instance required to some degree to actually search flexibly for a job with respect to wage, job content and commuting time (Ministry of Finance, 1998; Hasselplug, 2005; Venn, 2012). Public employment services are also better able to monitor job search behavior than a certain mindset or attitude. For these reasons, we decided to focus on flexibility as a job search behavior in this study.

### 3.2 A multidimensional construct

In addition, we consider FJSB to be a multidimensional construct. Research suggests that people weigh different components in the selection of their future job (Boswell, Roehling, LePine & Moynihan, 2003; Chapman, Uggerslev, Carroll, Piasentin & Jones, 2005; Turban, Lau, Ngo, Chow & Si, 2001). In this decision process, one component (e.g. wage) often outweighs other components (e.g. commuting time) or a particular component is decisive when choosing a new job. In parallel, unemployed persons may search for a new job in a flexible way on a particular dimension, but not on another dimension, which makes it useful to distinguish different dimensions instead of using a general flexibility construct (cf. Vansteenkiste et al., 2013).

In line with the flexibility demands OECD policymakers generally request from unemployed individuals and building on the literature related to the job choice process—i.e., the job design, job fit, willingness to sacrifice, and underemployment literature— we distinguish three dimensions of FJSB: flexibility with respect to wage/hierarchical level, job content and commuting time.

First, OECD policymakers often expect FJSB from unemployed individuals in terms of *pay*, i.e., an unemployed individual must also search for and accept jobs that offers a lower wage than his or her previous job or than the usual wage for that occupation (Hasselpflug, 2005; Ministry of Finance, 1998; Venn, 2012). The pay/hierarchical level has also proven to play an important role when deciding on a new job (e.g., Boswell et al., 2003; Osborn, 1990; Konrad, Edgar, Lieb & Corrigan, 2000). The amount unemployed jobseekers want to be paid in a future job varies widely, with some jobseekers willing to make concessions upon the wage of their previous job, whereas others not (Feldstein & Poterba, 1984; Jones, 1989; Hogan, 2004). Hogan (2004) indicated that around 60% of British jobseekers have wage demands that are less than their previous wage. Along the same lines, a group of Belgian and Dutch scholars, who between the 1970s and 1990s studied the sacrifices unemployed jobseekers are willing to make when offered jobs, also found that the pay/hierarchical level is one of the main aspects unemployed individuals make concessions upon (e.g., Deleeck, Van Hove, Janssens & Peeters, 1988; Kloosterman, 1987; Kroft, Engbersen, Schuyt & Van Waarden, 1989; Miltenburg & Woldringh, 1990; Van Wezel, 1972). This type of job search behavior also corresponds to one of the frequently studied dimensions of underemployment, namely pay/hierarchical underemployment (being underpaid or at a lower hierarchical level compared with the previous job or level of education) (e.g., McKee-Ryan & Harvey, 2011).

Second, OECD policymakers require, to some extent, that unemployed individuals search flexibly with respect to their *job content or skill usage*, i.e., an unemployed individual must also look for and accept jobs in other occupational areas than his or her previous job or studies (Hasselpflug, 2005; Ministry of Finance, 1998; Venn, 2012). Literature suggests that this is also one of the key factors jobseekers take into account when deciding on a new job (Boswell et al., 2003; Chapman et al., 2005; Taylor & Bergmann, 1987; Turban, Eyring & Campion, 1993; Turban et al., 2001). Job fit theory (Edwards, 1991; Kristof, 1996; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005) indicates that people evaluate the extent to which job demands coincide with their knowledge, skills, and abilities. However, unemployed individuals are not always in a position to look for jobs that fit best with their knowledge, skills, and abilities. Research suggests that in order to find reemployment, a large proportion of unemployed jobseekers (up to 50% and more) are willing to accept jobs that require retraining (e.g., Kloosterman, 1987; Kroft et al., 1989; Miltenburg & Woldringh, 1990; Van Wezel, 1972). Moreover, jobseekers often end up in jobs for which they are overskilled (e.g., Green & McIntosh, 2007; McKee-Ryan & Harvey, 2011).

Third, OECD policymakers have also developed legislation regarding the *commuting time* and expect unemployed job seekers to also search for and accept jobs that demand a certain, predetermined transportation time (Hasselpflug, 2005; Ministry of Finance, 1998; Venn, 2012). Several studies from the 1970s through the 1990s demonstrated that the majority of unemployed jobseekers (up to 54%) are willing to accept jobs for which they have to commute extensively (Deleeck et al., 1988; Kloosterman, 1987; Kroft et al., 1989; Miltenburg & Woldringh, 1990; Van Wezel, 1972). More recent research has also indicated that commuting time significantly influences jobseekers' decision to accept jobs (Boswell et al., 2003; Konrad et al., 2000; Turban, Forret & Hendrickson, 1998).

Hence, in our notion, FJSB refers to the extent to which jobseekers also apply for jobs that deviate in terms of pay/hierarchy, content and commuting time from their past jobs and/or previous training.

#### **4. Flexible job search predictors**

A first aim of this study is to examine antecedents of flexible job search behavior. In a review of the job search literature, Saks (2005) indicates that there are three categories of predictors of job search behavior: situational variables, individual difference variables and biographical variables. Situational predictors comprise jobseekers perceptions of the situation and include variables as financial hardship and social support (Kanfer et al., 2001; van Dam &

Menting, 2012; Saks, 2005; Wanberg et al., 1996). Individual difference variables refer to characteristics of the jobseeker, such as personality variables (e.g., self-esteem), motivational factors (e.g., self-efficacy) and attitudes toward employment and work (e.g., employment commitment) (Saks, 2005; Wanberg et al., 1996). The last category of predictors that Saks (2005) distinguishes, are biographical variables, like gender, age, education and race. These have been proven to be only weakly related to job search behavior (Kanfer et al., 2001; Saks, 2005). In this study, we therefore decided to only take up situational and individual difference variables and to simply control for biographical variables. This is in line with several studies of which the authors also only focused on situational or individual difference variables in their model (e.g., Coté, Saks & Zikic, 2006; Saks & Ashforth, 1999; Wanberg et al., 1996; Wanberg, Kanfer & Rotundo, 1999).

First, we expect situational variables to predict the extent to which job seekers search flexibly. We take up two situational variables which have been included often in job search research, i.e. financial hardship and subjective norms (Kanfer et al., 2001; van Dam & Menting, 2012; Saks, 2005; Wanberg et al., 1996). Job seekers who are facing greater financial difficulties have a greater financial need to find work and will therefore often search more intensely in order to find a new job faster (Kanfer et al., 2001; Saks et al., 2005; Wanberg et al., 1999). Also the expectation of close friends or family members to find work (i.e., subjective norms) can provide additional pressure during the job search, which can also translate into a more vigorous search (Zikic & Saks, 2009; Wanberg, Glomb, Song & Sorenson, 2005). Past research has demonstrated that people who experience more financial hardship or pressure from their close environment are more likely to develop an employment motive (van Dam & Menting, 2012). Individuals with an employment motive want to find employment fast and are not very selective in their job search, since they consider unemployment as a negative experience which they want to end as quickly as they can. This seems to correspond with people who search in a flexible way. As such, financial hardship and subjective norms may be positively related to FJSB. We therefore expect a positive relationship between financial hardship and subjective norms on the one hand and the different types of flexible job search on the other, with one exception. That is, for the relationship between financial hardship and commuting search flexibility, we expect a negative impact. This is because those who struggle financially often also have less means for transportation (like owning a car), and may therefore be inclined to search a job closer to home.

*Hypothesis 1a. Financial hardship is positively related to flexible job search behavior with respect to pay/hierarchy and skills, and negatively related to commuting time flexible job search behavior.*

*Hypothesis 1b. Subjective norms is positively related to each dimension of flexible job search behavior.*

Also individual differences are likely to explain differences in flexible job search behaviour. We include four individual difference variables: employment commitment, reemployment efficacy, career adaptability and career planning. Employment commitment and reemployment efficacy are individual difference variables that are often included in job search research (Saks, 2005). We expect opposing effects of both variables on FJSB. First, we expect a positive relationship between employment commitment and FJSB. Employment commitment indicates how important and central employment is to a job seeker (Kanfer et al. 2001; Rowley & Feather, 1987; Saks, 2005). Previous studies have related this attitude positively to job search behaviors, like job search intensity and effort (Kanfer et al., 2001; Wanberg et al., 1999). People who are committed to work, do not want to stay unemployed for a long time and may therefore use a broader search scope than people who are less inclined to find reemployment. Hence, they may approach their job search in a more flexible way.

*Hypothesis 2a. Employment commitment is positively related to each dimension of flexible job search behavior.*

Next, we assume that the second individual difference variable, reemployment efficacy, is negatively related to FJSB. Reemployment efficacy refers to jobseekers perceived ability to find reemployment (Wanberg, Zhu & Van Hooft, 2010). If a jobseeker does not have much confidence in his chances on the labor market, he may set his standards for a new job lower and may therefore target a wider range of jobs, even jobs that are different in terms of previous working experience and educational background. Previous research demonstrates, for instance, that one's perceived reemployment chances reduces the demanded wage level in a new job (Christensen, 2001; Pannenberg, 2007). As such we hypothesize:

*Hypothesis 2b. Reemployment efficacy is negatively related to each dimension of flexible job search behavior.*

Finally, we expect career adaptability and career planning to affect flexible job search behavior. Though career variables like these haven't been frequently included in job search studies, recent research has demonstrated that they can have significant predictive power for the job search process (Koen et al., 2010). Studying career variables in a job search context is relevant as it helps understanding how adaptive resources in the career impact the behavior one sets to make a career transition (here: from unemployment to employment) (Koen et al., 2010). We expect opposing effects from the two career variables on FJSB. First, we assume career adaptability to be positively related to FJSB. Career adaptability refers to an individual's willingness to change behavior, feelings and thoughts in response to changing environmental factors (Fugate, Kinicki & Ashforth, 2004). Career adaptability has been shown to impact the degree to which people are willing to explore themselves and their environment and their ability to align their personal characteristics, such as knowledge and skills, to situational demands (Ashford & Taylor, 1990; Chan, 2000; Savickas, 1997). Individuals high on career adaptability may therefore be more likely to explore different types of jobs, which may imply that they will be more flexible in their job search.

*Hypothesis 3a. Career adaptability is positively related to each dimension of flexible job search behavior.*

Next, we expect that career planning will be negatively related to FJSB. Career planning refers to having clear career goals and having a strategy to attain these goals (Gould, 1979; Zikic & Klehe, 2006). Having less clear career goals may induce individuals to search for all types of jobs: jobs that are in line and not in line with previous job experience and/or educational background. In addition, individuals with clearer career goals often have a more progressive career plan in mind for themselves. Hence, taking a step back in terms of wage, commuting time,... may often not be part of that plan. As such career planning may be negatively linked to FJSB.

*Hypothesis 3b. Career planning is negatively related to each dimension of flexible job search behavior.*

## **5. Impact of flexible job search behavior on reemployment**

The second aim of this study is to examine the relationship between FJSB and established job search success outcomes. Vansteenkiste et al. (2013) investigated whether a flexible attitude

during unemployment constrained or stimulated one's job search success. They found that unemployed jobseekers who adopt a flexible attitude receive in total *less* job offers, since they bump more into employers who believe they lack the relevant experience or educational background, or because they feel too insecure during the selection process. However, their study makes no distinction between different types of flexible job search. In this study, we reexamine their model and investigate whether our proposed types of FJSB can be related to job search outcomes in a same way. One of the downsides of Vansteenkiste et al.'s study is that it is cross-sectional and, does not look at the actual reemployment likelihood of unemployed jobseekers. We are able to address this obstacle by using a longitudinal design and including the likelihood of reemployment as indicator of job search success. In line with Vansteenkiste and colleagues, we assume that search flexibility may have both a positive and a negative impact on individuals' job search success (see Figure 1). We elaborate both paths in the next paragraphs.

### 5.1 A positive path

First of all, FJSB may increase the number of job offers an unemployed individual receives through job search intensity and the number of job interviews received. Job search intensity refers to the frequency with which job seekers, during a set period of time, engage in specific job search activities, like visiting job websites, discussing job leads with friends and sending out resumés to prospective employers (Kanfer et al., 2001; Saks, 2006). Individuals who search in a flexible way in terms of pay/job level, skills or commuting time are less strict in their demand of a future job and take into account both jobs that are in line with as well as jobs that deviate from their previous job or studies on these respective aspects. Hence, they are likely to put in more time and effort to map all the different jobs they consider and use more diverse job search channels. For instance, being flexible with respect to commuting time implies also looking for jobs in a wider area. To identify these jobs therefore, additional search channels and effort may be needed, like using contacts all over the country, also looking at national newspapers or using broader search terms at job websites which may give more hits and therefore need more time to cover. Tapping more search channels and spending more time using them, both lead to a higher job search intensity (Kanfer et al., 2001). As such, we assume that each of the three forms of job search flexibility will be positively related to job search intensity.

*Hypothesis 4. Flexible job search behavior is positively related to job search intensity.*

Job seekers who spend more time searching for a job are in general more aware of potential job openings and hence, are likely to apply more frequently for a job. As such, they may become more familiar with the application process and better able to tune their applications to the specific needs of employers. This may increase the number of invitations they get for a job interview, which in turn can improve their chances to get a real job offer. Former studies indeed confirm that job search intensity enhances the number of job interviews (Bradley & Taylor, 1992; Côté et al., 2006; Saks, 2006; Saks & Ashfort, 2000), which has been found to positively impact the number of job offers (Côté et al., 2006; Saks, 2006; Saks & Ashforth, 2000) and the likelihood of reemployment (Côté et al. 2006).

*Hypothesis 5a. Job search intensity is positively related to the number of job interviews.*

*Hypothesis 5b. The number of job interviews is positively related to the number of job offers.*

*Hypothesis 5c. The number of job offers is positively related to the likelihood of job reemployment.*

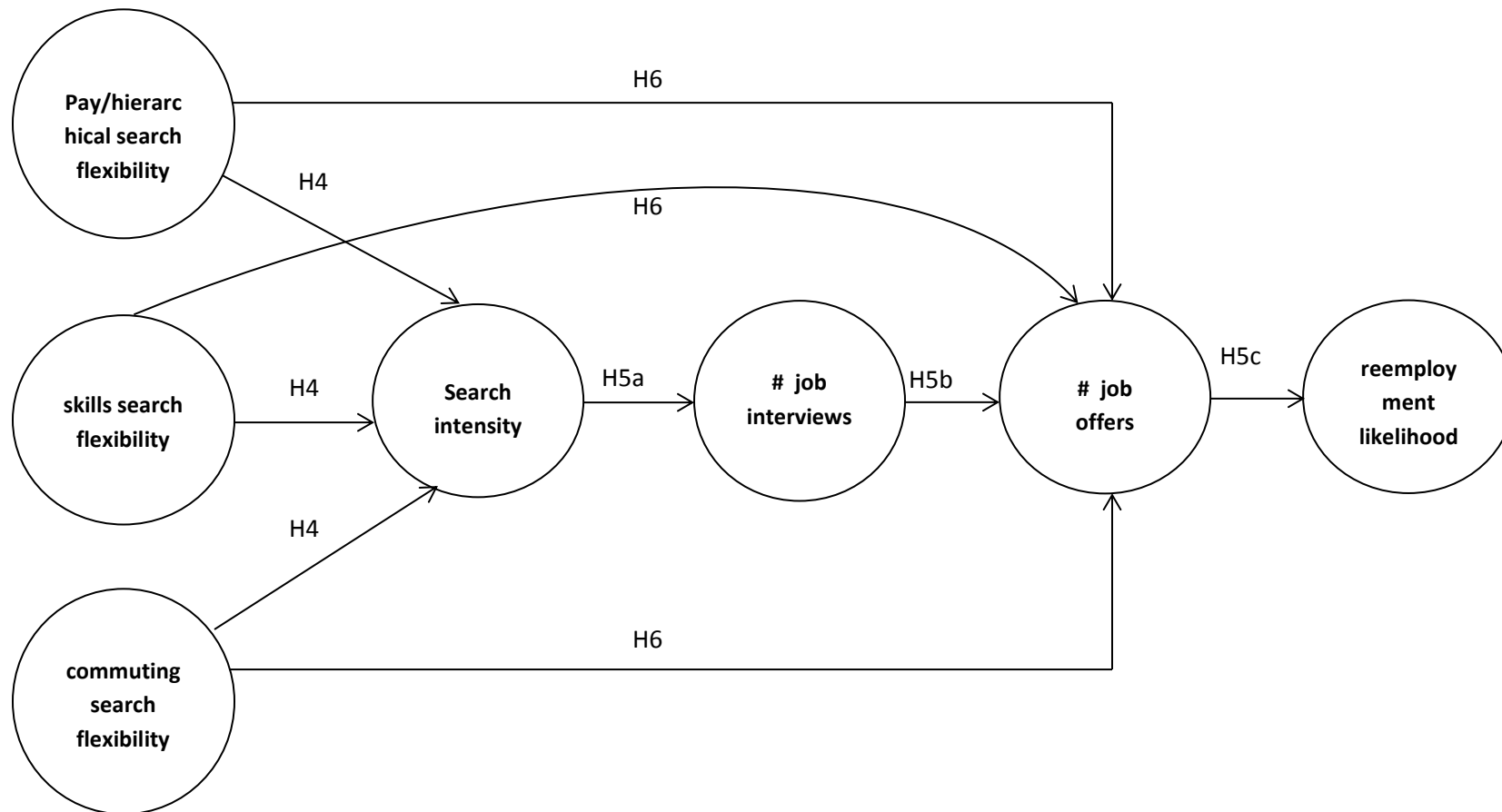
## **6. A negative path**

Next to this positive path, we believe that there can also be a negative effect of FJSB on the number of job offers. Recent research demonstrates that unemployed individuals who adopt a flexible attitude (i.e., are “psychologically mobile”) experience more barriers to getting a job offer, like employers who want more job related experience or the feeling of insecurity during job interviews (Vansteenkiste et al., 2013). Employers generally look for employees who fit well with the organisation and the vacant job and who have the right experience and aspirations (Bretz, Rynes & Gerhart, 1993; Judge & Ferris, 1992), whereas flexible applicants may be considered as an inferior match to the organisation since they may lack the required skills or motivation. In addition, employers may believe that employees who are flexible in terms of pay/hierarchy, skills or commuting time, have not carefully pondered over their decision, and as such may regret or become dissatisfied with their decision in time (Aldag & Power, 1986; Timmermans & Vlek, 1994). Therefore, they may be reluctant in hiring them, believing that they have a higher likelihood of leaving the organization on their own initiative in the near future. As a result, we hypothesize:

*Hypothesis 6. Flexible job search behavior relates negatively to the number of job offers.*



**Figure 1.** Hypothesized model between flexible search behavior, search intensity and job search success.



Note: \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$ ; +  $p < 0.10$

## 7. Method

### 7.1 Procedures and Participants

The data were collected with a random sample of 6000 Flemish unemployed job seekers. We targeted *short-term* unemployed individuals who had a paid job before they became unemployed. In Flanders, the first 6 months of unemployment, unemployed jobseekers may – without financial penalty – refuse jobs which are not in line with their own preferences. Afterwards, however, unemployed individuals risk losing (part of) their unemployment benefits if they not search for or if they refuse to accept jobs which are deemed “fitting” according to the criteria defined in the ‘Law of Suitable Employment’ (Wet van de Passende Dienstbetrekking). In this law, jobs are regarded as suitable even if they are in a different profession than the one in which one used to work, if they are not in line with one’s educational background, if they demand a commuting time of up to 4 hours a day and if they pay at least as much as the unemployment benefit. In some circumstances, the protection period of six months can be shortened if deemed sensible by the public employment agency (e.g., when the person’s education or previous work experience can objectively be regarded as offering poor chances of reintegration into the labour market). In practice however, this has hardly ever been done up to now. Since we try to measure the effect of a flexible search when it is performed in a rather ‘voluntary’ way, the individuals in our sample were at most 4 months unemployed when they participated in the study and therefore protected from public employment agency interventions.

Contact information of the 6000 unemployed individuals was provided by the Flemish public employment agency (VDAB). Participants had the opportunity to answer the questionnaire online or on paper. The questionnaire was conducted in October 2011 and reached 1743 respondents ( $RR_{T1} = 29\%$ ). After removing the respondents who were not actively looking for a new job ( $N=412$ ), we remained with a sample of 1331 respondents. The average age of these respondents was 38 years ( $sd\ 10.71$ ); 58% of them were female and 31% were lower educated (i.e. at most second stage of secondary education). Respondents had on average been unemployed for 2 months ( $sd\ 1.50$ ). We use this sample to test the hypotheses of the antecedents of FJSB.

Three months after the first data collection, we sent the respondents a new questionnaire which they could answer online or on paper. The questionnaires of this second wave were

answered by 1159 respondents, which is a response of 66%. After removing the respondents who were not actively looking for a new job and the incomplete records on any of the variables under study, we remained with a sample of 672 respondents. The average age of these respondents was 39 years (sd 10.39); 56% of them were female and 26% were lower educated (i.e., at most second stage of secondary education). Respondents had on average been unemployed for 2 months (sd 1.52) at the first measurement moment. We use this two-wave sample to test the hypotheses on the impact of FJSB on reemployment.

We performed a drop-out analysis by using a multiple logistic regression where the dependent variable was a dummy indicating whether one responded or not at T2. The explanatory variables – all measured at T1 – were age, gender, ethnic origin, education, unemployment duration, flexible job search behavior with respect to pay/hierarchy, skill usage and commuting time, subjective norms, financial hardship, reemployment efficacy, employment commitment, career planning, career adaptability and job search intensity. We found that respondents at T2 were older, had more financial hardship and searched more intensified than the non-respondents. Hence, we can conclude from this drop-out analysis that the attrition is not fully random, however, we found no differences in FJSB between respondents and non-respondents, which is the core variable of this study.

## 7.2 Measures

**Flexible job search behavior.** We generated an initial set of items to measure FJSB based on OECD policymakers' flexibility requirements regarding unemployed individuals (Ministry of Finance, 1998; Hasselpflug, 2005; Venn, 2012) and inspired by existing flexibility and underemployment scales (e.g., Van den Broeck et al., 2010). As policymakers mainly define FJSB from unemployed individuals in terms of content, pay/job level, and commuting time, we distinguished these dimensions in our initial set of items. Scholars at the EGOS Colloquium of 2011 in Gothenborg provided their input on a first version of the scale. Items were further refined in response to the comments we received at this conference. This refined version was discussed with several experts (e.g., people from the Flemish unemployment agency VDAB) and scholars in the field. Finally, the face validity of the scale was tested by trying out and discussing the multidimensional scale with a number of unemployed individuals. In total, we retained nine items that measure the three proposed dimensions of flexible job search behavior. First, *pay/hierarchical* search flexibility consists of five items measuring the extent to which respondents (also) search for jobs that pay less or are at a lower hierarchical level compared with their previous jobs or educational levels. An example includes: "I (also) search for jobs

which pay less than my previous job.” Second, search flexibility regarding *skills* comprises three items measuring the degree to which respondents (also) respond to jobs that are not in line with their previous jobs or studies. For example, “I (also) search for jobs of which the content differs strongly from that of my previous job.” Third, *commuting* search flexibility is a one-item measure that assesses the degree to which respondents (also) search for jobs that have longer commuting times between home and work than their previous jobs. Most studies that have examined commuting measure it as a one-item construct and focus merely on the commuting time or distance between home and work (e.g., Chapple, 2001; Clark, Huang & Withers, 2003; Gutiérrez-i-Puigarnau & van Ommeren, 2010; Rouwendal, 2004; van Ommeren, Rietveld & Nijkamp, 1997, 1999). In line with these studies, we also included a one-item measure for commuting search flexibility. Participants indicated their response on all nine items on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (definitely).

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) with varimax rotation on all nine items confirmed the three factors as explained above. The reliability of the pay/hierarchical and skill search flexibility scales was  $\alpha = 0.81$  for both measurements. We also examined the discriminant validity of this measure by exploring whether our FJSB measure assessed something different than two other job search behaviors, i.e. job search intensity (measured with the scale of Blau, 1994 – see further) and job search strategy (measured with the scale of Crossly & Highhouse, 2005). The job search strategy scale measures three types of search strategies, i.e. the haphazard strategy (i.e., not having a concrete plan when looking for a job), exploratory strategy (i.e., having several job options in mind and trying to gather as much information as possible of these different options from various sources) and the focused search strategy (i.e., having a limited number of job options in mind and guiding search efforts towards screening a limited number of vacancies and employers). To test the discriminant analyses of our measure, we performed a CFA on the 9 items representing the three dimensions of FJSB, together with the 10 items representing job search intensity and the 15 items representing the three different types of job search strategies. This model shows an acceptable fit:  $\chi^2[423]=1530$ ,  $p<.01$ ; SRMR=0.06; RMSEA=0.05; CFI=0.91. Moreover, each of the items loaded significantly to its corresponding factor.

**Subjective norms.** Subjective norms were assessed at T1 by the two-items scale of Vinokur & Caplan (1987), which has been used extensively in previous research (e.g., Wanberg et al., 2005; Zikic & Saks, 2009). A sample item is “Think about the person closest to you, such as a spouse, family member or good friend. How hard does this person think you should try to find a

job in the next three months?”. Answers were rated on a scale ranging from 1 (not hard at all) to 4 (extremely hard). Reliability of this scale was 0.85.

**Financial hardship.** Financial hardship was measured at T1 using the three-items scale of Vinokur and Caplan (1987), and Vinokur and Schul (1997) (e.g., “How difficult is it for you to live on your total household income right now?”). Responses were on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not at all difficult; 5 = extremely difficult). The Cronbach’s alpha of this scale was 0.89.

**Reemployment efficacy.** Consistent with Wanberg et al. (2010), we assessed reemployment efficacy at T1 using five items (e.g., “How easy or difficult do you expect it to be to find another job?”). Responses ranged from 1 (very difficult) to 5 (very easy). The Cronbach’s alpha of this scale was 0.85.

**Employment commitment.** We assessed employment commitment at T1 using the eight-items scale developed by Rowley & Feather (1987). A sample item is “Even if I won a great deal of money in the lottery, I would want to continue working somewhere”. Responses could be rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The reliability of this scale was 0.85.

**Career planning.** Career planning was measured at T1 using the six-items scale of Gould (1979), which has been used extensively in previous research (Abele & Wiese, 2008; Barnett & Bradley, 2007; Koen et al., 2010; Saks & Ashforth, 2002). A sample item is “I have a plan to obtain my career objectives”. Responses were on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Reliability of this scale was 0.85.

**Career adaptability.** Career adaptability was assessed at T1 by using the 5-item scale of London (1993). A sample item is “To which extent are you able to adapt to changes in your career”. Respondents indicated their response on a 5-point scale (1= totally not; 5 = totally). The cronbach’s alpha of this scale was 0.79.

**Job search intensity.** Job search intensity was measured at T1 by the 9-item scale of Blau (1994), which has been extensively used in previous research (Zikic & Saks, 2009; Sverko, Galic, Sersic & Galesic, 2008; Côté et al., 2006; Van Hooft, Born, Taris, Van Der Flier & Blonk, 2004; Saks & Ashforth, 2000; Wanberg et al., 1999 amongst others). Participants indicated how frequently they used certain search sources or performed a variety of search behaviors during

the last 3 months. Answers were given on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = never, 0 times; 5 = very often, at least 10 times). Sample items are e.g. “Reading job advertisements in the paper”, “Contacting employment agencies”, “Visiting job websites”, “Discussing job leads with friends or relatives”. The reliability of this scale was  $\alpha = 0.82$ .

**Job search success.** Job search success was measured at T2 using three indicators, namely the number of job interviews received in the last three months, the number of job offers received in the last three months and a dummy variable indicating whether jobseekers found reemployment or not. All three measures have been extensively used in previous research as indicators of job search success (e.g. Koen et al. 2010; Saks, 2006; Saks & Ashforth, 2000).

**Controls.** We used age, gender, ethnic origin, education and unemployment duration as control variables in the regressions on the antecedents of FJSB. Additionally, we took up needs-supply fit, wage and commuting time in the previous job as a control.

Age, gender, family status, fired in previous job or not, ethnic origin, education, unemployment duration, financial hardship, job search self-efficacy, reemployment efficacy, needs-supply fit in previous job, wage level in previous job and commuting time in previous job were used as control variables in the regressions on job search success, since they are regularly controlled for and/or have proven to significantly affect job search variables in previous research (e.g. Kanfer et al., 2001; Saks, 2005; Sverko et al., 2008; Zikic & Klehe, 2006).

## 8. Results

### 8.1 Descriptive statistics

In table 1a and 1b, we present the descriptive statistics and correlations of the different variables under study. Table 1a shows that the unemployed search on average most flexibly with respect to their skills ( $M=3.08$ ,  $SD=1.05$ ), followed by flexibility with respect to pay/hierarchy ( $M=2.31$ ,  $SD=.82$ ) and flexibility with respect to commuting time ( $M=2.27$ ,  $SD=1.11$ ). There are moderate positive correlations between the different types of flexibility ( $r_{\text{pay/hierarchy and skills}}=.27$ ;  $r_{\text{pay/hierarchy and commuting}}=.30$ ;  $r_{\text{skills and commuting}}=.19$ ). Table 1a also demonstrates that financial hardship is significantly and positively correlated with skills search flexibility ( $r=.08$ ,  $p<.01$ ) but not with the other two types of FJSB; and subjective norms and employment commitment are only significantly and positively related to commuting search flexibility ( $r_{\text{subjective norms}}=.13$ ,  $p<.01$ ;  $r_{\text{employment commitment}}=.15$ ,  $p<.01$ ). Reemployment efficacy and

career planning are negatively correlated with pay/hierarchical flexibility ( $r_{\text{reemployment efficacy}} = -.11$ ,  $p < .01$ ;  $r_{\text{career planning}} = -.17$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and skills search flexibility ( $r_{\text{reemployment efficacy}} = -.11$ ,  $p < .01$ ;  $r_{\text{career planning}} = -.13$ ,  $p < .01$ ), but not to commuting search flexibility. Finally, we found a positive relationship between career adaptability and respectively skills search flexibility ( $r = .12$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and commuting search flexibility ( $r = .14$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

Table 1b shows that there is a positive correlation between each dimension of FJSB and job search intensity. That is, there is a positive correlation between job search intensity and respectively pay/hierarchical search flexibility ( $r = .11$ ,  $p < .01$ ), skills search flexibility ( $r = .15$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and commuting search flexibility ( $r = .10$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Moreover, commuting search flexibility is positively related to the number of job interviews ( $r = .10$ ,  $p < .01$ ), whereas pay/hierarchical and skills search flexibility were negatively related to the number of job offers (respectively  $r = -.08$ ,  $p < .05$  and  $r = -.10$ ,  $p < .05$ ). None of the three types of FJSB was significantly related to reemployment.

Finally, we can establish a positive correlation between job search intensity and the number of job interviews ( $r = .29$ ,  $p < .01$ ). In turn, the number of job interviews is positively correlated with the number of job offers ( $r = .28$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and reemployment ( $r = .19$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Finally, the number of job offers also has a positive correlation with reemployment ( $r = .40$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

**Table 1a.** Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations between FJSB and predictors.

	Mean (sd)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. pay/hierarchical search flexibility	2.31 (.82)								
2. skills search flexibility	3.08 (1.05)	.27**							
3. commuting search flexibility	2.27 (1.11)	.30**	.19**						
4. financial hardship	2.94 (1.05)	-.02	.08**	-.03					
5. subjective norms	2.85 (.84)	.02	.04	.13**	.12**				
6. employment commitment	3.50 (.79)	-.01	-.01	.15**	.26**	.30**			
7. reemployment efficacy	2.33 (.72)	-.11**	-.11**	.01	-.20**	-.02	-.07*		
8. career adaptability	3.54 (.65)	.04	.12**	.14**	.02	.07*	.14**	.06*	
9. career planning	3.32 (.80)	-.17**	-.13**	-.03	-.02	.03	.16**	.25**	.22**

Note: \*\* p&lt;0.01; \* p&lt;0.05

**Table 1b.** Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations between FJSB, job search intensity and search success (n=672).

	Mean (sd)	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. pay/hierarchical search flexibility	2.31 (.82)						
2. skills search flexibility	3.07 (1.02)	.27**					
3. commuting search flexibility	2.31 (1.10)	.26**	.19**				
4. search intensity	3.37 (.73)	.11**	.15**	.10*			
5. jobinterviews	2.93 (4.18)	.04	.06	.10**	.29**		
6. job offers	1.01 (1.59)	-.08*	-.10*	-.06	.05	.28**	
7. reemployment likelihood	.35 (.48)	-.06	.00	.03	.06	.19**	.40**

Note: \*\* p&lt;0.01; \* p&lt;0.05



## 8.2 Antecedents of FJSB

We tested hypotheses 1 to 3 using hierarchical linear regressions, presented in table 2. In the first step, we took up the control variables age, gender, origin, educational level and unemployment duration. We also included respectively wage in the previous job, needs-supply fit in the previous job and commuting time in the previous job in the regressions on pay/hierarchical, skills and commuting time search flexibility. In the second step, we included the 6 antecedents. We base the discussions of the hypotheses on the second step of the hierarchical regressions.

Hypothesis 1a proposed that financial hardship would be positively related to pay/hierarchical and skills search flexibility, and negatively to commuting flexibility. We only found support for the negative relationship between financial hardship and commuting job search flexibility ( $\beta = -0.08$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ); no significant impact with the other two types of FJSB was found. We can thus only partly confirm this hypothesis. In line with hypothesis 1b, we found subjective norms to be positively related with commuting search flexibility ( $\beta = 0.06$ ;  $p < 0.10$ ); however, no significant relationship was found with pay/hierarchical or skills search flexibility. Therefore, also hypothesis 1b can only be partly confirmed.

In hypothesis 2a, we assumed that employment commitment and each dimension of FJSB would be positively related. However, this is only the case for commuting search flexibility ( $\beta = 0.14$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). Hypothesis 2b is confirmed for two out of the three FJSB dimensions: reemployment efficacy is negatively related to respectively pay/hierarchical search flexibility ( $\beta = -0.09$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) and skills search flexibility ( $\beta = -0.08$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ).

Hypothesis 3a is also only partly confirmed, as we can only establish a significant positive relationship between career adaptability and respectively skills search flexibility ( $\beta = 0.17$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) and commuting search flexibility ( $\beta = 0.16$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). No significant relationship is found with pay/hierarchical search flexibility. Hypothesis 3b, which assumed a negative relationship between career planning and each of the FJSB dimensions, is confirmed for pay/hierarchical search flexibility ( $\beta = -0.14$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) and skills search flexibility ( $\beta = -0.13$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), but not for commuting search flexibility.

**Table 2.** Results of the regression analysis of the antecedents of FJSB (Standardized coefficients).

	Pay/hierarchical search flexibility (N=947) <sup>1</sup>		Skills search flexibility (N=1065) <sup>1</sup>		Commuting search flexibility (N=997) <sup>1</sup>	
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 1	Step 2	Step 1	Step 2
age	.07*	.05	-.09**	-.10**	-.07*	-.06 <sup>+</sup>
female	-.09**	-.09**	-.02	-.02	-.14**	-.13**
origin	-.03	-.02	-.05	-.04	-.02	-.01
low education	.01	.01	.00	-.00	-.06*	-.05
unemployment duration	.10**	.09**	-.00	-.01	.06*	-.07*
wage previous job (log)	.07*	.09*				
ns fit previous job			-.21**	-.20**		
commuting time previous job					-.23**	-.24**
financial hardship		-.02		.05		-.08**
subjective norms		-.01		.01		.06 <sup>+</sup>
employment commitment		.00		-.02		.14**
reemployment efficacy		-.09*		-.08*		-.04
career adaptability		.05		.17**		.16**
career planning		-.14**		-.13**		-.04
$\Delta R^2$		.03**		.05**		.06**
$R^2$	.04**	.07**	.06**	.11**	.08**	.14**

Note: <sup>1</sup> Respondents with incomplete records on any of the variables under study were excluded from the regression. \*\* p<0.01; \* p<0.05; <sup>+</sup> p<0.10

### 8.3 Outcomes of FJSB

We used hierarchical linear and logistic regression analysis to test the hypotheses of the second part of this study. The results of the different steps in the hierarchical regression analyses can be found in tables 3 and 4. Figure 2 gives an overview of the main findings with respect to the proposed research model. We base the discussion of the results on the coefficients of the last step of every hierarchical or logistic regression, where all the variables of interest were included in the model.

Hypothesis 4 expected a positive relationship between each form of job search flexibility and job search intensity. This hypothesis is only confirmed for two of the three types of FJSB. That is, only skills search flexibility ( $\beta=0.13$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) and commuting search flexibility ( $\beta=0.07$ ,  $p<0.10$ ) are positively related to job search intensity.

Furthermore, in line with hypothesis 5a to 5b, we find that a more intensified job search leads to a higher number of job interviews three months later ( $\beta=0.27$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), which in turn has a positive effect on the number of job offers ( $\beta=0.26$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). In addition, we find a marginally significant positive relationship between commuting search flexibility and the number of job interviews ( $\beta=0.07$ ,  $p<0.10$ ), which was not hypothesized. The results of table 4 further demonstrate that the number of job offers has a positive impact on reemployment ( $\text{Exp}(\beta)=2.27$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), which is in line with what we put forward in hypothesis 5c.

Next to this positive path, the results also partly confirm the proposed negative impact of FJSB on the number of job offers (hypothesis 6). Skills search flexibility ( $\beta=-0.09$ ,  $p<.05$ ) and commuting search flexibility ( $\beta=-0.08$ ,  $p<.05$ ) are both negatively related to the number of job offers as suggested in hypothesis 3. However, we do not find any significant relationship between pay/hierarchical search flexibility and the number of job offers. As such, we can only partly confirm hypothesis 6.

**Table 3.** Results of the regression analysis on the outcomes of FJSB (Standardized coefficients).

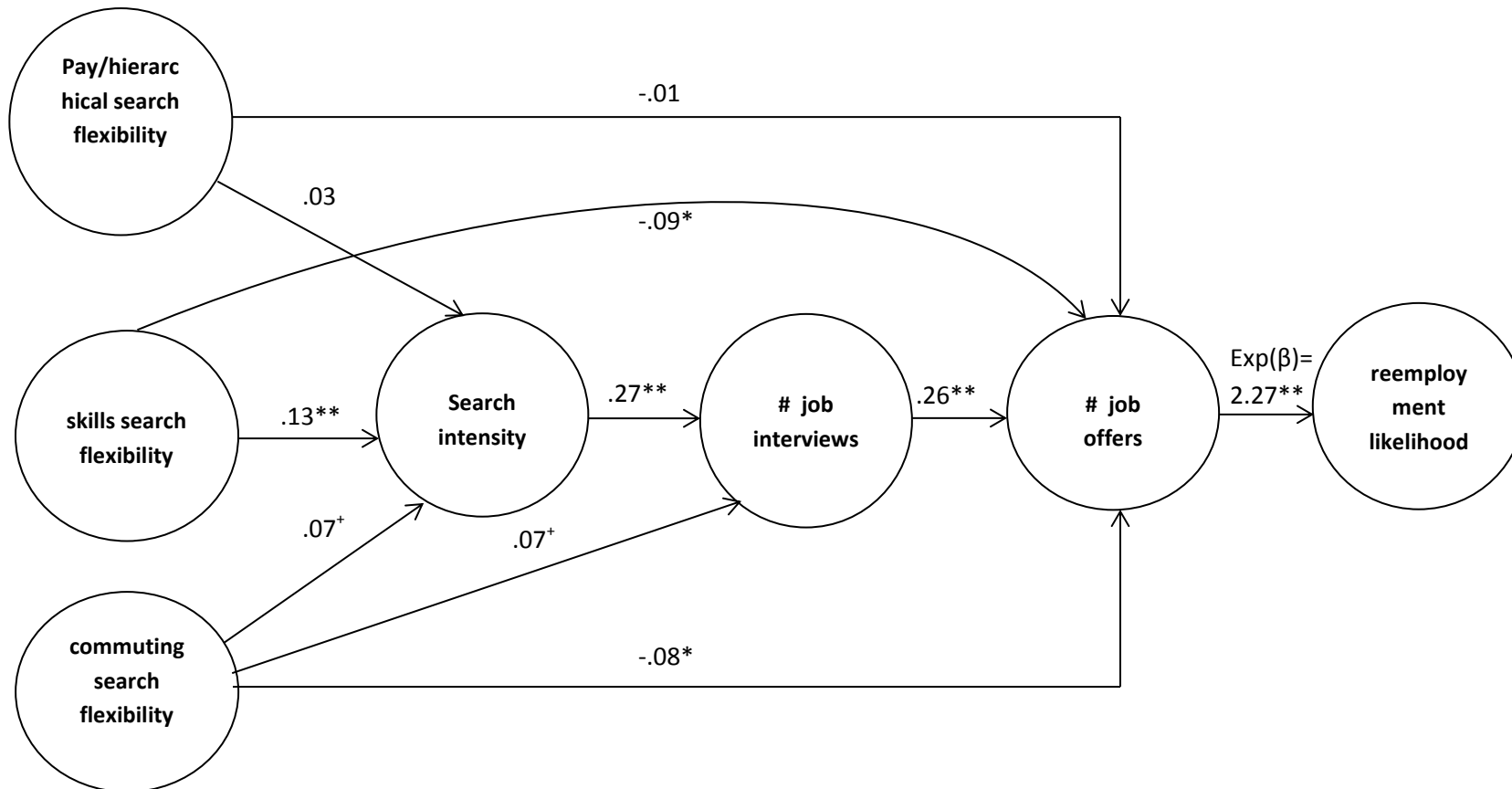
	search intensity		number of job interviews			number of job offers			
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4
age	-.13**	-.11**	-.14**	-.12**	-.09*	-.11**	-.13**	-.12**	-.09**
female	.04	.06	-.14**	-.13**	-.14**	-.03	-.05	-.05	-.02
origin	.03	.04	-.04	-.04	-.05	-.05	-.06	-.06	-.05
low education	.02	.02	-.05	-.05	-.06	-.02	-.03	-.03	-.01
unemployment duration	.09*	.09*	-.05	-.05	-.07 <sup>+</sup>	-.15**	-.15**	-.16**	-.14**
fired	.07 <sup>+</sup>	.07 <sup>+</sup>	.10**	.10**	.08*	-.04	-.04	-.05	-.07 <sup>+</sup>
partner	.07 <sup>+</sup>	.07 <sup>+</sup>	.06	.06	.04	.03	.02	.02	.01
financial hardship	.12**	.11**	.08*	.08*	.06	.01	.02	.00	-.01
job search self-efficacy	.07 <sup>+</sup>	.08*	-.03	-.03	-.05	-.01	-.01	-.02	-.01
reemployment efficacy	-.09*	-.07 <sup>+</sup>	.02	.03	.05	.12**	.11**	.11**	.10**
previous wage (log)	.18**	.17**	.14**	.13**	.09*	.05	.06	.04	.02
previous commuting time	.01	.03	.09*	.11**	.11**	.02	.00	-.00	-.03
fit previous job	-.01	.02	.06	.07 <sup>+</sup>	.07 <sup>+</sup>	.08*	.07 <sup>+</sup>	.07 <sup>+</sup>	.05
pay/hierarchical search flexibility		.03		-.02	-.03		-.02	-.02	-.01
skills search flexibility		.13**		.06	.03		-.07 <sup>+</sup>	-.09*	-.09*
commuting search flexibility		.07 <sup>+</sup>		.09*	.07 <sup>+</sup>		-.06	-.07	-.08*
search intensity					.27**			.10*	.03
jobinterviews									.26**
job offers									
Δ R <sup>2</sup>		.03**		.01 <sup>+</sup>	.06**		.01 <sup>+</sup>	.01*	.06**
R <sup>2</sup>	.08**	.10**	.09**	.10**	.16**	.08**	.09**	.10**	.16**

Note: \*\* p&lt;0.01; \* p&lt;0.05; + p&lt;0.10

**Table 4.** Results of the logistic regression analysis (Standardized coefficients).

	<b>reemployment likelihood</b>				
	<b>Step 1</b>	<b>Step 2</b>	<b>Step 3</b>	<b>Step 4</b>	<b>Step 5</b>
<b>age</b>	.96**	.96**	.96**	.97**	.97**
<b>female</b>	1.06	1.07	1.05	1.16	1.17
<b>origin</b>	.49*	.49*	.47*	.50 <sup>+</sup>	.60
<b>low education</b>	.89	.89	.88	.93	.95
<b>unemployment duration</b>	.82**	.82**	.81**	.82**	.87*
<b>fired</b>	.99	.98	.96	.90	1.04
<b>partner</b>	1.18	1.19	1.16	1.12	1.12
<b>financial hardship</b>	.83*	.83*	.81*	.79*	.75**
<b>job search self-efficacy</b>	1.31	1.32	1.27	1.34	1.31
<b>reemployment efficacy</b>	1.22	1.21	1.24	1.21	1.10
<b>previous wage (log)</b>	1.38	1.37	1.23	1.07	.93
<b>previous commuting time</b>	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
<b>fit previous job</b>	1.03	1.03	1.03	1.00	.98
<b>pay/hierarchical search flexibility</b>		.92	.91	.92	.95
<b>skills search flexibility</b>		1.02	1.00	.98	1.08
<b>commuting search flexibility</b>		1.07	1.05	1.03	1.09
<b>search intensity</b>			1.29*	1.13	1.07
<b>jobinterviews</b>				1.09**	1.03
<b>job offers</b>					2.27**
<b>Cox &amp; Snell R<sup>2</sup></b>	.08**	.09**	.09**	.11**	.23**
<b>Nagelkerke R<sup>2</sup></b>	.12**	.12**	.13**	.15**	.31**

Note: \*\* p<0.01; \* p<0.05; <sup>+</sup> p<0.10

**Figure 2.** Standardized regression coefficients of the relationship between FJSB, search intensity and job search success (n=672)

Note:  $^{**}$   $p < 0.01$ ;  $^{*}$   $p < 0.05$ ;  $^{+}$   $p < 0.10$

## 9. Discussion

In this study, we examined antecedents and outcomes of FJSB. Inspired by policy research and the literature on job design, job fit, underemployment and willingness to sacrifice, we distinguished three flexibility dimensions: pay/job level, skills and commuting search flexibility. First, we tested the relationship between these three types of FJSB and job search antecedents. The results showed that even though the three forms of FJSB are moderately correlated, they are sometimes influenced by other aspects, which supports distinguishing multiple forms of FJSB.

As a general result regarding the antecedents of FJSB, we found that searching flexibly with respect to pay/hierarchy and skills arises to a greater extent due to more negative reasons, such as not knowing how to proceed in the career or seeing few labor market perspectives. Commuting flexibility on the other hand, can to a greater extent be linked to more positive drivers, like feeling committed to work or having an adaptable career attitude.

If we analyze the specific results of the relationship between the antecedents and each type of FJSB, we first of all establish that there is no significant link between the situational variables and searching flexibly with respect to pay/hierarchy. That is, those experiencing more financial or social pressure to find work do not search more often for jobs which pay less than the previous job/are below its job level. In Belgium, replacement incomes when unemployed are relatively generous, which could hold people feeling financial or social pressure back from lowering their job standards in the beginning of the unemployment period. Secondly, we found mixed support for the link between the four individual difference variables and pay/job level flexibility. Unemployed feeling more committed to work do not search more flexibly on this respect, whereas unemployed who see less labor market opportunities for themselves are inclined to search more flexibly on pay/hierarchy and thus may feel like having to make more sacrifices in order to have any chance on a job. The fact that they see their labor market situation more negative could imply a number of things. It could be that these individuals are just more pessimistic in nature and therefore think more negative about their chances even if there is no immediate reason to do so. However, it could also be that these individuals have correct perceptions, in which case it could be that flexible individuals are those who hold a weaker position on the labor market and have more difficulties in finding a job. Still, we did not find that those demonstrating more flexibility are the less educated (there was no significant

effect of educational level on flexibility). Next, unemployed individuals with more fuzzy career goals (i.e., who have less career planning) also search more flexibly on pay/hierarchy. Hence, those who do not really know which direction to go with the career are more flexible on their pay/hierarchical level.

When we looked at the antecedents of searching for jobs in other job domains (i.e. being flexible with respect to skills), we found similar relationships as those with searching flexibly with respect to pay/hierarchy. Unemployed individuals who have less of a career plan in mind and see few labor market opportunities for oneself also search more flexibly regarding their skills. Therefore, unemployed wanting to reorient themselves, do not seem to do this as part of a well worked-out strategy for their future career, but rather because they believe not having much prospects on the labor market. As opposed to flexibility with respect to pay/hierarchy, we did find that those who are career adaptable search more often for jobs with a different job content. Being better able to deal with changing career circumstances is seen as something positive which could help people to make progress in their career (e.g., Koen et al., 2010). Still, unemployed flexible on their skills do not seem to succeed in successfully convincing employers that they are a good match, since we established that these individuals receive less job offers. This may be partly explained by their lack of career focus when they present themselves at potential employers. Therefore, it seems that in particular these individuals could gain from extra career guidance by counselors, so that their flexibility or will to reorient comes across more as a well-considered career step.

We found several different results when we studied the antecedents of searching for a job that demands more commuting time. The situational variables had the expected relationship with this type of flexibility: unemployed individuals experiencing more financial pressure are *less* flexible on their commuting time whereas those who feel more social pressure are *more* flexible on this respect. We could also confirm part of the assumed relationships with the individual difference variables. Being more committed to work and being more adaptable in the career makes unemployed search for jobs in wider geographical areas. However, we could not establish the expected relationships with reemployment efficacy or career planning. As such, commuting flexibility seems to arise to a greater extent due to positive reasons (feeling committed to work, having an adaptable career attitude) and to a lesser extent due to negative reasons (such as not knowing how to proceed in the career or seeing few labor market perspectives) compared to the other two types of flexible job search behavior.



Next, we investigated whether FJSB leads to reemployment success. To this end, we re-examined and adapted the model of Vansteenkiste et al. (2013). The results of the regression analyses indicated that unemployed individuals who search in a flexible way with respect to their skills and commuting time, search more intensely and as a result receive more invitations to the selection process. The latter was found to increase the number of job offers and to lead to a greater likelihood of reemployment. However, for both flexibility types, there is also an opposing force at work which negatively impacts the number of job offers and hence, offsets the increased likelihood of reemployment, so that in the end, searching in a flexible way with respect to skills and commuting time may not increase the chances of finding a new job – at least in the beginning of the unemployment period. The negative effect on the number of job offers may be due to employers who prefer applicants with “linear” career aspirations (cf. Cappelli, 2012). That is, they may prefer applicants who search for jobs that are in line with their previous employment experience and that do not demand extensive commuting. They may fear that hiring a highly flexible person in terms of skills and commuting time could jeopardize the person-environment fit. It is rather remarkable that individuals actively looking for jobs in other job domains and thus willing to reorient, are less often granted the opportunity to do so, especially in a context where a lot of employers complain of having difficulties to fill certain job vacancies (European Commission, 2012). Up to now, the responsibility for this problem has mainly been put on the mismatch between the skills education provides and the skills required by employers. Our results seem to indicate that this may be only part of the story. Cappelli (2012) dedicated a whole book on this subject and came to the conclusion that even when vacancies are difficult to fill, employers still make unrealistic and excessive demands as to working experience, previous job titles,... towards potential employees. The results of this study show indeed that even when people put in the effort of willing to reorient, they are not always rewarded, which seem to confirm that the current selection techniques may be part of the bottleneck problem.

Unlike expected, we did not find any impact of searching flexibly regarding the pay/job level on any job search success outcome. The finding that this type of flexibility is not negatively linked to the number of job offers, may be explained by the fact that jobseekers who apply for jobs that are below their previous wage or job level are more often overskilled for the job, which may be less a problem from an employer point of view since overskilled employees need less investments of extra education or training. Anyway, we established that just like searching flexibly with respect to skills and commuting time, searching flexibly regarding one’s pay/hierarchy does not positively affect the reemployment likelihood, which goes against the

expectations of both policymakers and scholars. Hence, our results point to an important caveat that should be included in further thinking about flexibility during unemployment by both policymakers and scholars, at least in the beginning of the unemployment period.

### **9.1 Implications for theory**

This study first of all adds important insights to the job search literature. Up to now, most studies examining job search behavior focused on job search intensity, i.e. the frequency with which job seekers, during a set period of time, perform certain job search activities, like visiting job websites, discussing job leads with friends, etc. (Kanfer et al., 2001; Saks, 2005). Even though this type of job search behavior has proven to be an important predictor of reemployment outcomes (see Kanfer et al., 2001 and Saks, 2005 for an overview), it is presumed that this only forms the tip of the iceberg and that much can be gained from adopting a broader approach to job search behavior (Koen et al. 2010; Saks & Ashforth, 2002). In particular, scholars have called to introduce and study new indicators of job search behavior (Koen et al., 2010; Saks & Ashforth, 2002). By focussing on flexible job search behavior, we answered this call. Moreover, we demonstrated that it is useful to conceptualize this type of job search behavior as a multidimensional measure. Though the three forms of FJSB are related, they are not always influenced by the same antecedents or have the same effects on the job search outcomes.

This study also adds to the career literature. Our findings suggest that people do not solely determine their future career path. In the notion of protean careers, people are largely deemed responsible for developing their own career (Hall, 2004; King, 2004). In this respect, it is often believed that people can take matters into their own hands and can control their future by just conducting the proper behaviors. As such, the emphasis is principally on agency-factors and less on structural factors (Forrier, Sels & Stynen, 2009). In this vein, flexibility is believed to be a suitable behavior as it may enable unemployed jobseekers to adjust better to their new context of unemployment and may let them find reemployment more easily. However, our results indicate that flexibility is not always rewarded in the job search process, suggesting that unemployed individuals are also subject to structural components, i.e., circumstances which they cannot control. Moreover, it also shows that searching flexibly is perhaps not always the best way to deal with a period of unemployment, even though it is believed to be one of the key behaviors in new career thinking (Hall, 2004; Koen et al., 2010; Mervish & Hall, 1994). Next, we also studied career variables (like career adaptability and career planning) in a job search context. Only recently scholars have started to link career attitudes to job search behaviors

(e.g., Zikic & Saks, 2009; Koen et al., 2010). Future research could benefit from adopting a similar approach, as both our study and the one of Koen and colleagues (2010) shows that career variables are able to significantly predict job search behaviors.

## 9.2 Implications for policy and practice

We believe that the results of this study demonstrate that one should be cautious with promoting people to search flexibly and at least provide extra guidance to flexible jobseekers. In particular, there is an important role for counselors in helping unemployed jobseekers to find a new job. Firstly, it may be worthwhile to let job counselors advise jobseekers not to go for every possible job or not to burn energy on job opportunities which are likely to fail anyway (cf. Vansteenkiste et al. 2013). At least in the beginning of the unemployment period, our results show that it may be more interesting to not search too widely with respect to skills and commuting time, but more or less in the direction of the previous job, since this is likely to be more valued by potential employers. Secondly, if one does broaden the search scope in terms of skills and commuting time, then it is important to offer adequate guidance so that these flexible jobseekers come across as confident and motivated, and are able to convince employers of their willingness to perform the job and to take away any possible concerns regarding their sustainable employability in the organisation.

Nevertheless, it is also important to notice that we focused on short-term unemployed in this study, so that the respondents that searched in a flexible way mainly did this on a ‘voluntary’ ground, i.e., without much pressure from the Flemish public employment agency. As such, we do not know the exact effects of a flexible search if this would be induced or enforced by a public employment agency. On the one hand, one could expect that if unemployed individuals are pressurized to be flexible, its negative impact on the number of job offers will be *more* pronounced. Jobseekers who are forced to be flexible may come across less convincing, motivated or confident in the selection process, which may make potential employers even more reluctant in hiring them. On the other hand, however, it is possible that the results of the current study are more negative on the number of job offers and reemployment likelihood, since those who are now voluntarily flexible could be more often those individuals who have a weaker job profile. If *everyone* is expected to be flexible on penalty of one’s unemployment benefits, this selection-effect may be erased, making the negative link between flexible job search behavior and the number of job offers *less* pronounced.

### 9.3 Limitations and directions for future research

There are some limitations connected with this study, which could be addressed in future research. First, institutional factors could play an important role. For instance, in countries where the system of unemployment benefits is less generous (i.e. shorter duration and/or lower level of benefits), the pressure to accept just any kind of job may be bigger and hence the impact of flexible job search behavior may be different. It may therefore be interesting to go deeper into the influence of institutional systems on the impact of searching flexibly. Moreover, we studied respondents who were not pressurized by the public employment agency to search flexibly. Future research could scrutinize the impact of searching in a flexible way when this is forced upon by policy requirements.

Second, we focused on short-term unemployed persons. It is not clear what the impact of a flexible search will be when we look at persons who are unemployed for a longer period. It could therefore be very useful to repeat this research with a mixture of short-term and long-term unemployed individuals and to look in more detail at the impact of the unemployment duration on the outcomes presented in this study.

Third, this study was executed in Flanders, region of Belgium. It is not clear whether some of the found results are generalizable or rather country-specific. For instance, it may be interesting to explore whether the hesitance of employers to hire people with non-linear career paths also reoccurs in other countries.

Fourth, we only focused on three types of FJSB, inspired by existing policy regulations and several research streams. Future research could identify and study other types of flexibility, such as flexibility with respect to working hours, vacation time, work/non-work balance, etc.

Fifth, we looked at the impact of FJSB on one type of job search success outcome, namely the reemployment likelihood. We established that flexibility benefits nor harms unemployed individuals on this respect. Recently, scholars have begun to recognize that a successful job search does not simply imply finding just any job, but rather finding a *good* job that has the prospect of long-lasting employment (Koen et al., 2010; McKee-Ryan, Virick, Prussia, Harvey & Lilly, 2009). It may therefore be interesting for future research to also investigate the impact of flexible job search behavior on the quality of the newly found job. It could be that flexibility goes together with another important risk, namely the chance of ending up in job which is substandard given one's competencies and skills (cf. Van den Broeck et al., 2010). As such the

quality of the newly found job may be more negative, leaving flexible individuals with the danger of ending up in a less sustainable career path.

#### 9.4 Conclusion

In this study, we focused on flexible job search behavior among unemployed jobseekers. This type of behavior has been promoted and encouraged by both policymakers and scholars, but rarely been investigated up to now. As such, this study made an important contribution to the job search literature and to existing policy insights. This study has also some practical implications, since it demonstrates that people who search in a flexible way in terms of pay/hierarchy, skills and commuting time do not find reemployment with a greater likelihood. This finding goes against some of the prevailing assumptions made by policymakers and scholars. Hence, this study points out that flexible job search behavior among unemployed jobseekers does not achieve the anticipated results, indicating the necessity of rethinking policies aimed at promoting this type of behavior.

#### 10. References

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## APPENDIX: NEDERLANDSE SAMENVATTING

### 1. Abstract

De interesse in flexibel zoekgedrag, d.i. de mate waarin werkzoekenden zoeken naar jobs die afwijken van de voorgaande werkervaring en genoten studies, is sterk toegenomen in de afgelopen jaren. Zowel wetenschappers als beleidsmakers geloven dat dit type zoekgedrag belangrijk is voor niet-werkende werkzoekenden (nwwz) en hen kan helpen om aan een job te raken. Wie flexibel zoekt, neemt immers meer jobs in overweging, waardoor de kans op het vinden van een job kan verhogen. Beleidsmakers gaan er bovendien vanuit dat het stimuleren van flexibel zoekgedrag bij werklozen kan helpen om de toenemende kwalitatieve mismatch op de arbeidsmarkt te verminderen. Ondanks de positieve verwachtingen t.a.v. flexibel zoekgedrag, is er tot op heden nog maar weinig concreet empirisch onderzoek verricht naar de impact van flexibiliteit bij werklozen. Bijgevolg is er momenteel weinig zicht op wie flexibel zoekt en de mate waarin flexibiliteit in zoekgedrag de (her)tewerkstellingskansen bevordert/inperkt. Met deze studie willen we ingaan op dit hiaat in de literatuur.

### 2. Introductie en theoretisch kader

Flexibel zoekgedrag wordt door zowel beleidsmakers als wetenschappers als iets positiefs beschouwd voor het werkloze individu. Beleidsmakers worden in de laatste jaren geconfronteerd met toenemende werkloosheid. Tegelijkertijd echter, zijn er nog heel wat werkgevers die aangeven dat ze bepaalde vacatures moeilijk ingevuld krijgen. Er is sprake van een toenemende mismatch op de arbeidsmarkt waarin de kenmerken en vereisten van openstaande vacatures vaak niet overeenstemmen met voorkeuren en vaardigheden van werkzoekenden. Heel wat beleidsmakers geloven dat deze mismatch verholpen kan worden door meer flexibiliteit van nwwz. Bovendien wordt verwacht dat meer flexibiliteit de nwwz ook kan helpen aan het vinden van een nieuwe job, gezien verondersteld wordt dat dit type gedrag kan leiden tot een intensievere zoektocht naar werk en zo tot een grotere kans op aanwerving. De verwachting dat flexibiliteit kan leiden tot een grotere tewerkstellingskans bij nwwz is ook één van de hoofdredenen die vaak aangehaald wordt om dit type gedrag te stimuleren en te eisen in de wetgeving rond het zoekgedrag van nwwz in zowat alle OECD-landen.

Ook loopbaanonderzoekers verwachten positieve effecten van flexibel zoekgedrag bij nwwz. Loopbaanonderzoekers hebben geconstateerd dat de meer traditionele loopbaan, waarbij men gedurende lange tijd bij dezelfde werkgever werkzaam was, steeds meer vervangen wordt door een meer turbulente loopbaan, waar men vaker transitie maakt en verandert van werkgever. In deze 'grenzeloze' loopbanen wordt het goed kunnen omgaan met veranderingen beschouwd als een essentiële loopbaanvaardigheid. Flexibiliteit van nwwz wordt daarom verondersteld als een belangrijke eigenschap die de toeleiding naar nieuw werk succesvoller kan doen verlopen.

Hoewel flexibiliteit als een positieve zoekgedraging wordt beschouwd door beleidsmakers en loopbaanwetenschappers, zou het ook kunnen dat dit niet noodzakelijk het zoeksucces bevordert. Nwwz die flexibel zoeken zouden immers diegenen kunnen zijn met de minst rooskleurige arbeidsmarktkansen of de minst duidelijke planning voor de verdere loopbaan. Daarnaast zouden flexibele nwwz meer moeilijkheden kunnen ondervinden om werkgevers te overtuigen dat ze een goede match zijn met de job, gezien ze bijvoorbeeld minder relevante werkervaring kunnen voorleggen.

Tot op heden is niet empirisch onderzocht geweest welke nwwz flexibel gaan zoeken en of dit gedrag leidt tot een grotere tewerkstellingskans. Met deze studie willen we daarom het huidige inzicht uitbreiden omtrent flexibel zoekgedrag door zowel haar antecedenten als impact te bestuderen. We doen dit door:

1. te focussen op hoe flexibel werklozen zoeken (nl. in welke mate ze ook ingaan op jobs die afwijken van hun vroegere jobs en/of opleiding) eerder dan op hoe intensief men zoekt,
2. te kijken naar twee types antecedenten die vaak onderscheiden worden in de literatuur rond zoekgedrag, namelijk situationele variabelen (i.e. de perceptie van de situatie door de nwwz) en individuele verschil variabelen (i.e. de kenmerken van de nwwz). We linken deze twee types antecedenten aan flexibel zoekgedrag om zo een beter beeld te krijgen van wie flexibel zoekt,
3. te bestuderen wat de impact is van flexibel zoekgedrag op de kans van hertewerkstelling. Op die manier kunnen we in kaart brengen of flexibiliteit inderdaad helpt om nwwz met een grotere kans toe te leiden naar een nieuwe job zoals verwacht door beleidsmakers en loopbaanonderzoekers.

We hanteren hierbij een multidimensionale invulling van het construct 'flexibel zoekgedrag' gebaseerd op de flexibiliteitseisen die beleidsmakers in OECD-landen

veelal stellen aan werklozen. Meer specifiek maakten we een onderscheid tussen flexibiliteit op het vlak van inhoud, loon/hiërarchisch niveau en pendeltijd.

### 3. Data

We verzamelden data op twee meetmomenten bij recente werklozen die voordien gewerkt hadden. Dit gebeurde in samenwerking met de VDAB. 6000 werklozen werden een eerste keer bevroegd na maximum 4 maanden werkloosheid. De respons op deze bevraging was 29% (N=1743). Na het verwijderen van de respondenten die niet actief op zoek waren naar een job (N=412), houden we 1331 respondenten over. Deze sample werd gebruikt om de analyses met betrekking tot de antecedenten van flexibel zoekgedrag uit te voeren. Een tweede bevraging volgde 3 maand later. In totaal namen 1159 respondenten deel aan deze tweede wave. Na het verwijderen van degenen die niet actief op zoek waren naar een job of die de vragen nodig voor dit onderzoek niet volledig hadden beantwoord, blijven 672 respondenten over. Deze sample gebruiken we voor de analyses met betrekking tot de impact van flexibel zoekgedrag op de kans van hertwerkstelling. De analyses gebeurden via hiërarchische lineaire of logistische regressies.

### 4. Bevindingen

De resultaten tonen aan dat meer financiële of sociale druk ervaren om te zoeken naar werk of meer betrokken zijn tot werk de respondenten niet aanzet om vaker flexibel te zoeken op vlak van loon/jobniveau of jobinhoud. Een minder duidelijk loopbaanplan voor ogen hebben en minder goede arbeidsmarktkansen zien voor zichzelf stimuleert nwwz daarentegen wel om meer flexibel te zoeken op beide vlakken. Ook beter kunnen omgaan met veranderingen in de loopbaan leidt er toe dat nwwz vaker gaan zoeken voor jobs die inhoudelijk anders zijn dan hun voorgaande job of genoten studies. Zoeken naar jobs in een ruimere geografische regio (i.e. flexibel zijn m.b.t. pendeltijd) wordt aangemoedigd door meer sociale druk, een grotere betrokkenheid tot werk en meer aanpasbaar zijn in de loopbaan, maar niet door het hebben van een minder duidelijk plan voor de verdere loopbaan. Onze resultaten tonen daarnaast ook aan dat flexibel zoeken met betrekking tot de jobinhoud en pendeltijd nwwz aanzet om intensiever te zoeken naar een nieuwe job. Op die manier komen ze bovendien vaker terecht in het selectieproces voor een nieuwe job (i.e. krijgen ze vaker een uitnodiging voor een jobinterview) en krijgen ze vaker een concrete jobaanbieding wat de tewerkstellingskans op haar beurt positief beïnvloedt. Echter we vinden voor beide vormen van flexibel zoekgedrag ook een

directe negatieve link terug op het aantal jobaanbiedingen. Tot slot kunnen we constateren dat geen enkele van de drie vormen van flexibel zoekgedrag bij nwwz leidt tot een hogere tewerkstellingskans.

## **5. Conclusie en beleidsrelevantie**

Deze studie toont aan dat flexibel zoeken niet leidt tot een hogere tewerkstellingskans, wat in tegenstelling is tot wat beleidsmakers en loopbaanonderzoekers vaak veronderstellen. Eén van de verklaringen hiervoor kan zijn dat werkgevers vaak weigerachtig staan tegenover het aanbieden van een concrete jobaanbieding aan dit type nwwz. We vinden eveneens terug dat een minder duidelijke loopbaanplanning nwwz aanzet om flexibel te zijn op vlak van hun jobinhoud en loon/jobniveau. Beide vaststellingen wijzen erop dat het aanmoedigen van werklozen om flexibel te zoeken best gepaard kan gaan met ondersteunende maatregelen zodat nwwz er beter kunnen in slagen potentiële werkgevers te overtuigen hun een jobaanbieding te geven. Daarnaast toont deze studie ook aan dat nwwz die bereid zijn te heroriënteren hier niet altijd de kans toe krijgen. In het licht van een toenemend aantal werkgevers die stellen moeilijkheden te ondervinden om vacatures ingevuld te krijgen, is dit een relevante vaststelling. Dit resultaat lijkt erop te wijzen dat de mismatch tussen de vaardigheden die onderwijs aflevert en de vaardigheden gevraagd door werkgevers niet volledig verantwoordelijk is voor de toenemende krapte op de arbeidsmarkt. Een andere verklaring zou kunnen liggen in het feit dat de huidige selectietechnieken van werkgevers te veeleisend en te veel gericht zijn op werkervaring en vorige jobtitels, wat voor een deel mee de knelpuntproblematiek kan in stand houden. Meer (experimenteel) onderzoek naar hoe werkgevers sollicitanten aanwerven kan hier meer duidelijkheid over scheppen.